

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF CURRENT INTELLIGENCE  
19 September 1961

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CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Situation in Phong Saly Province

1. Phong Saly Province, one of the most isolated and inaccessible areas of Laos, has long been a principal focus of the struggle between the Pathet Lao and the Royal Government. Despite the paucity of roads and trails, Phong Saly is much more accessible to Communist China and North Vietnam than it is to Vientiane. Under the terms of the 1954 Geneva accords, Phong Saly was designated, along with Sam Neua Province, as a regroupment area for Pathet Lao forces, whose integration into the Royal Laotian army was to be the subject of lengthy negotiations lasting until late 1957. In the meantime, the Pathet Lao retained de facto control of much of the province, particularly in its southern extremities, which lie astride the riverine approaches to the royal capital of Luang Prabang.

2. After the 1957 Vientiane agreements, leading to the establishment of a short-lived coalition government under Souvanna Phouma, Phong Saly was restored to royal government control. In a typical Laotian pattern, the province was in effect the private bailiwick of the powerful Boupha clan, whose most influential member is Lt. Col. Khamouane Boupha. As commander of the 11th Volunteer Battalion and as provincial governor, Khamouane for a number of years has been the virtual warlord of Phong Saly. Although Khamouane himself appears to be above suspicion, some members of the Boupha clan have reportedly had ties of varying intimacy with the Pathet Lao;

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These associations failed to deter Khamouane, in the summer and fall of 1959, from fighting energetically against the Pathet Lao when they went underground to resume the armed struggle against the Royal government.

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3. The Kong Le coup of August, 1960, and the subsequent split of the army into pro-Phoumi and pro-Kong Le-Souvanna Phouma factions confronted Khamouane

with what appeared to be a crisis of decision. For a few months he maintained a precarious neutrality, giving nominal support to the Souvanna government

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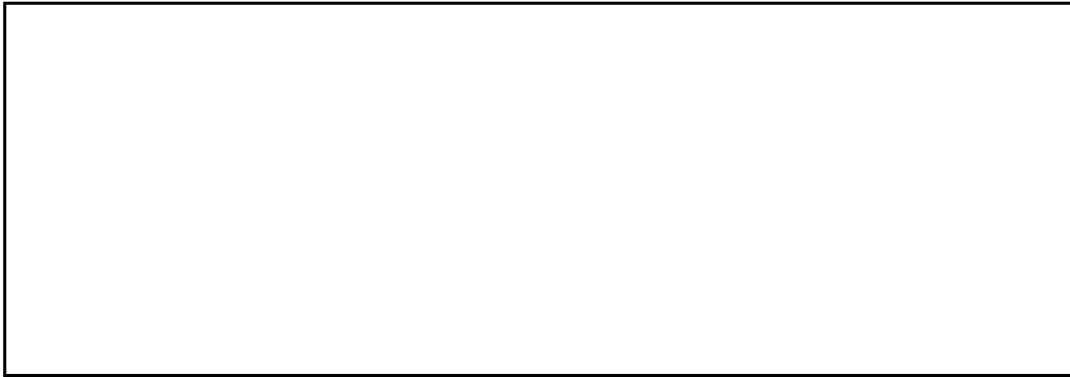
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A Phoumi-instigated coup in Luang Prabang in November, 1960, swung the First Military Region (comprising Phong Saly, Nam Tha and Luang Prabang Provinces) over to Savannakhet, a development which subsequently appeared to be perhaps the decisive event leading to the downfall of the Souvanna government and Phoumi's re-occupation of Vientiane. Khamouane, with his sympathy for Souvanna and distaste for Phoumi, refused to go along with it.

4. Khamouane's difficulties had been in the meantime compounded by the growing aggressiveness of the Pathet Lao in Phong Saly. During the fall of 1960, the Pathet Lao had moved back into the positions in the southern part of the province which they had held before 1957. Since then there has been a low-keyed but nevertheless serious struggle between Khamouane's neutralist forces and the Pathet Lao.

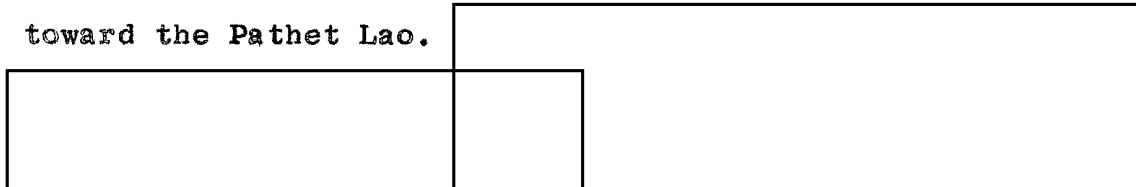
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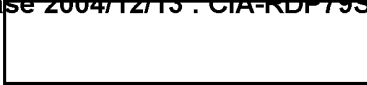


forces and the Pathet Lao in the province. Khamouane's units are estimated to total between 7,000 and 8,000 but this number is believed to include auto-defense forces and recruits of varying degrees of combat readiness in addition to the 11th Volunteer Battalion. The Pathet Lao are believed to be in the province in substantially lesser numbers, perhaps fewer than 500. Pathet Lao influence predominates in the south, while Khamouane's strength is probably centered to the north, in and around Phong Saly town.

6. Communist China has for the past six months been courting Khamouane, despite Khamouane's coolness toward the Pathet Lao.



Chinese, apparently in pursuance of an agreement reached with Souvanna in Peiping last spring, have begun work on a road connecting Yunnan Province with Phong



Saly town.

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7. That Peiping should select Phong Saly as the area in which to concentrate its support of anti-government forces in Laos is probably mainly attributable to the more than normal sensitivity it has traditionally manifested toward areas immediately adjacent to China's frontiers. Other factors may include an either tacit or explicit division of labor between the USSR, China, and North Vietnam in the bloc's overall program of support for anti-government forces.

8. Relations between Khamouane and the pro-Vientiane government commanders in neighboring Nam Tha and Luang Prabang Provinces have alternated between efforts to attract each other to their respective

causes and occasional minor skirmishes between the  
opposing forces.

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9. Despite Pathet Lao influence in Phong Saly, Khamouane is the key to future developments there. Just what course he will take will in all probability depend on which of a number of possible alternative sets of circumstances develops in Laos as a whole. Should a viable coalition government be formed under Souvanna, Khamouane will almost certainly be given an important role and will attempt to limit the extension of Pathet Lao influence in Phong Saly. Should hostilities be resumed, it seems likely that Khamouane will find it increasingly difficult to maintain his separate identity from the Pathet Lao, isolated as he is and completely dependent on the bloc for logistic support. Laotian army leaders continue to express the hope that Khamouane may eventually defect to the government side, but given the pressures to which he is subjected and given his distaste for Phoumi and other southern leaders now in control of the government, this seems a remote prospect.

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